



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

MAY 17 2006

The Honorable John Winn  
Commissioner of Education  
Florida Department of Education  
325 West Gaines St., suite 1514  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0100

Dear Commissioner Winn:

Thank you for submitting a proposal for the U.S. Department of Education's (Department) growth-based accountability model pilot project. I realize that our timelines were tight and sometimes inconvenient; I appreciate the work you and your staff have done to participate in this effort so far. The Department continues to believe that this pilot project can help determine whether growth models will, most importantly, provide a fair, reliable, and innovative mechanism for holding schools accountable for ensuring that all students reach grade-level standards in reading and mathematics by 2013–14.

In mid-March, the Department determined that Florida was meeting the “bright line principles” of the law – that is, ensuring all students are learning, making the system accountable, providing information and offering parents options, and improving teacher quality – and that the Florida growth model proposal seemed poised to meet the seven core principles outlined by Secretary Spellings in her letter on November 21, 2005. As such, Florida's proposal was forwarded to a group of peer reviewers who met on April 17–18, 2006. The range of changes and the number of conditions that the peer reviewers indicated would be required for Florida's model to be acceptable would be tantamount to writing a new proposal. On that basis, the Department is not approving the Florida proposal. However, with this letter I am inviting Florida to consider the peer reviewers' feedback and submit a revised proposal by September 15, 2006. Our intent is that the Department will again conduct an initial review and advance acceptable proposals to a second peer review to take place in mid-October that will be organized solely for Florida and the five other States who have advanced to this point in the process. If successful, Florida's revised growth model could be approved for implementation for the 2006–07 school year. To help you with this effort, in addition to the information in this letter, I am providing two pieces of information: 1) the peer report for Florida; and 2) a document produced by the peer review team that outlines several general themes and cross-cutting concerns raised during the peer review, although not necessarily specific to Florida's proposal. My staff and I are willing to discuss this information with you to help refine Florida's proposal.

The peers identified several strengths in the Florida proposal: the model was built upon a comprehensive statewide student-level database and an assessment that incorporates a vertical scale – both necessary components of a growth model. However, the peers also raised significant specific concerns regarding the Florida proposal. (Please refer to the enclosed peer report for details.) The peers were particularly concerned about the use of growth trajectories for individual students that are reset annually. In effect, some students would be counted as “proficient” (i.e., meeting the growth target) every year but never actually achieve grade-level standards. As a result, the growth model proposal did not support the goal of ensuring all students reach grade-level standards in reading and mathematics by 2013–14.

The peers also noted that the trajectories use only two ends point of data; Florida’s growth model does not take test scores from intervening years into account even though the State has considerably more data for many students. By resetting the growth trajectory annually based on the initial test score and using only two data points, students can get credit for projected progress when they actually did not make sufficient growth in a given year. In addition, the growth model includes only students with two years of data; the proposal does not address the inclusion of other students in the growth model. These and additional concerns are presented in the peer report that is enclosed.

If Florida decides not to revise its current proposal based on this feedback and submit a revised proposal by September 15, please note that the Department would welcome a new proposal from Florida along with other States later this year; these proposals would be due to us by November 1, 2006. The limit of approved plans through this pilot, however, will remain at ten.

The Department will rigorously evaluate the approved proposals, review information on how each pilot project is working, and share the results with other States, policymakers, and the public. With the knowledge gained from the approved growth models, the Department will be able to make an informed decision on whether to expand the pilot project beyond the 2006–07 school year.

Again, I appreciate your interest in the growth model pilot project and your continued efforts to ensure quality education for all children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Henry L. Johnson", written in a cursive style.

Henry L. Johnson

Enclosures

cc: Governor Jeb Bush  
Hanna Skandera